OK, Boomer: as a social media meme and social commentary on generational stereotypes

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

OK, Boomer is a controversial, ironic phrase that rose to popularity after a viral TikTok in October 2019. OK, Boomer expresses the enduring ideological divide between younger and older generations but with a contemporary twist in the form of memes shared on social media. The purpose of this research project is to explore the topic of OK, Boomer as a social media trend and conduct a deeper inquiry into the intergenerational conversation taking place online.

The divide between generations, intergenerational tension, and the push-back of younger generations against the established norms of older generations is nothing new. Societal change - in norms, beliefs, customs, communications styles, and even hairstyles - is unrelenting. As surely as our planet spins around the sun, so too will change come for each generation, and each generation will retaliate against the one before it.

Change is disagreeable to our primal brains. Change affects humans at all ages and can be seen in how older generations lament "the good old days" and young "Zoomers" with blue hair and active TikTok accounts see older generations as hopelessly behind. Although most change is eventually positive and moves society and humanity forward, change does not come without a struggle. When members of a social group feel angry, humiliated, powerless, or ignored because their values clash with mainstream values, those hurt feelings are communicated and expressed, using contemporary tactics.

For example, early American colonists boycotted British goods as a form of protest in the American Revolution, throwing tea into Boston Harbor. Suffragists staged parades and demonstrations to advocate for women's right to vote in the 1920's. In the 1960's, perhaps to the chagrin of their Silent Generation parents, young Boomers carried placards, staged sit-ins, wrote poetry and music to protest the Vietnam War and civil rights injustices, and advocated for

environmental protection, among other causes. Today, Gen Z and members of younger generations protest perceived attacks on their values using their native online tools to express their feelings - sites like Twitter, TikTok, YouTube, or SnapChat - and to defend themselves against criticism from older generations.

Another purpose of this research is to add to the understanding of the role of social media in the contemporary discussion of differences in beliefs, values, and norms between younger (Gen Z, Millennial) and older (Boomer) generations. An overarching hypothesis is that social media influences the tendency for generational groups to identify with a tribe, or "people like us," and as a result, will amplify myths and stereotypes about generational identities, resulting in members of a generation defending themselves against attacks from others on social media.

Examination of the literature revealed both positive and negative themes in social media memes about generational differences. In some cases, connection and understanding is created. In other examples, division and misunderstanding abounds.

Rationale

The analysis focuses on social media from the past several years containing the hashtag #OKBoomer (or that mention) in the content (written, audio or video). These findings are placed against the backdrop of dialog between generations in mainstream media, social media, and in academic research.

Once the universe of content was defined and analyzed, the inquiry moved into the ***what,*** and the ***how.   What*** are the top topics of intergenerational controversy? The hypothesis was that the top two themes found in OK, Boomer memes are climate change and economic inequality between generations, set against the backdrop of the unique changes sweeping society because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

How are these topics expressed? Content analysis reviewed the most common social media platforms used and the most influential sources. Influential was defined as those with the most engagement through memes, written posts, videos, and other content created about OK, Boomer.

This exploration sought to provide an understanding of why younger generations prefer social media to express their ideological frustrations to older generations, and to what degree do they feel they are succeeding? This report will ultimately include examples of both positive and negative intergenerational interactions that have also taken place on social media.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Meant to express the political frustration of Millennials and younger generations with what they see as a fundamentally inequitable and hostile political landscape, OK, Boomer memes became a shorthand way of signaling one's dissatisfaction with the deepening structural inequalities that present unprecedented challenges for younger generations. (Anderson)

Because social media communities enable generational groups to find a tribe or "people like us," members of each of these generations express their fear, resentment and outrage on social media. What is OK, Boomer really about? I concur with Romano's observation that OK, Boomer memes are a push-back against economic anxiety, the threat of environmental collapse, and people of different generations resisting change. (Romano, 2020) In addition, some of the meme's vitriol is misplaced against entire generations and falls into harmful ageism that ultimately creates polarization between groups, instead of fostering unity to help face our society's common challenges..

Examination of the literature identified two primary and repeated themes associated with the OK, Boomer meme: the issue of climate change and climate justice; and the issue of economic inequality between older (Boomer) generations and younger (Millennial) generations. A subsequent review of the literature confirmed that these two themes were consistently identified among researchers and form the basis of the two most important themes in this project.

Defining generations

A generation spans about 25-30 years and refers to all the people of about the same age within a group in society. (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). While generational differences are nothing new in human relationships or in U.S. politics, the difference in viewpoints between the generations are wider than ever. Two younger generations, Millennials and Gen Zers, stand on

one end of the spectrum from two older cohorts, the Baby Boomers and Silent Generations.. Pew Research Center defines the Millennial generation as adults born between 1981 and 1996. Those born in 1997 and later are considered part of a separate cohort often referred to as Gen Z. (Doherty 2018)

For the purposes of this report, references to "younger" generations are relevant to both Millennial and Gen Z age groups. As Vaitkevius observed, often groups of people are labeled with one broad category (Millennial) even if they don't technically fall into that age group, yet the author of the meme perceives they match the traits of such a person. (Vaitkevicius 2020) In this discussion, Gen Z is typically the group creating the actual meme content while the dialog tends to include both Gen Z and Millennial age categories.

Millennials are the most racially and ethnically diverse adult generation in U.S. history; as a group they are more than 40% non-white and tend to hold consistently liberal political viewpoints. (Doherty 2018) Comparatively, the Baby Boomer generation is defined as those born between 1946 to 1964 and make up 29% of the adult population. The Boomer generation alone is 72% non-Hispanic white and tends towards the conservative end of the political spectrum. (Doherty 2018)

Patterson adds to our understanding of the personalities of each generation, noting the distinct differences in work ethics and values between Baby Boomers and Millennials. Baby Boomers, born 1946 to 1964, have work characteristics identified as optimistic, valuing teamwork and cooperation, ambitious, and workaholic. Millennials, born between 1981 and 1996, have work characteristics including being hopeful, finding meaningful work, valuing diversity and change, and being tech savvy. (Patterson 2005) These differences in political

persuasions and workplace values were thrown into sharp contrast during the COVID-19 lockdowns when many employers shut down and people had to work from home.

Ageism

Ageism is a form of discrimination against persons of a certain age group. The expression of ageism on social media is not a new phenomenon in modern society, nor on social media. In October 2019, well before the COVID-19 pandemic, the phrase OK, Boomer went viral globally on TikTok and other social media platforms. It became a slogan for Millennials who felt Baby Boomers were out-of-touch with modern realities because of outdated and conservative beliefs, and were delaying progress on important societal issues, such as domestic economic inequities and global climate change. (Meisner 2020) Rising economic and political anxiety during the ensuing COVID-19 pandemic threw gasoline on the fire of existing tensions between generations, particularly around the themes of climate change and economic uncertainty.

OK, Boomer can be seen as an outgrowth of broader ageism in society; ageism that goes both ways, with members of each group criticizing the other's values. Krenz examines the origins of ageism in society and how intergenerational conflicts manifested in online behavior. From this perspective, many younger adults blame the Boomer generation for the declining health of our planet, misuse or waste of economic resources, and economic inequality between generations. (Krenz 2020)

COVID-19 Pandemic Influence

Pre-pandemic, Ok Boomer went viral around the world via TikTok and quickly became a slogan for Millennials who felt Baby Boomers, or any older adults for that matter, were out of touch. However, the pandemic exaggerated these intergenerational tensions and social media chatter drifted into harmful ageism. (Meisner 2020) The COVID-19 pandemic added to the

existing intergenerational conflict in terms of sharing memes online because many of the protective actions of social distancing, quarantine and masks were intended to protect older and health-compromised individuals. Thus, younger people had their freedoms and opportunities restricted in order to protect the health of older individuals, and resentment resulted. In some cases, the effects of the pandemic on the OK, Boomer theme took a darker turn, sometimes flipping the OK to "K.O." or to knock out/kill older people who are responsible for trashing the economy and the planet. (Pauliks 2021)

Defining memes

What is a "meme"? Merriam-Webster defines meme as, an idea, behavior, or style that spreads by means of imitation from person to person within a culture and often carries symbolic meaning representing a particular phenomenon or theme. (Merriam-Webster 2022) On the internet, memes are often used to comment on current issues. (Pauliks) As a means of communication, memes help people dialog about events in society, and to participate in criticism of these events. The criticism involves the use of humor, allowing distance from the topic. (Pauliks 2021) Humorous memes let people address sensitive topics, emotional issues, and express criticism in a way that would not be as palatable without the ironic messages of the meme format (Pauliks 2021).

OK, Boomer Theme: Economic inequality

Economic inequality between generations is a consistent theme in OK, Boomer memes and became more prevalent during the pandemic. (Aronson 2021) Young adults in the 18-29 age group were hit hard by the effects of pandemic lock downs. 90% of college students worldwide experienced school closures. More than 25% of college students lost jobs and many had their hours reduced. (Aronson 2021) Many college students were sent home to move back in with

family and struggled with loneliness after being cut off from their in-person social networks. Given the massive disruption in the typical milestones that come with transitioning from high school to college to the workforce, many young people feel uncertain about their futures and their ability to take on "adult" roles such as becoming financially self-supporting, getting married or buying a home, like previous generations did.

To deal with these frustrating realities, young people expressed themselves on social media, the primary means of communications for young adults ages 18-29. (Aronson 2021) Social media use increased dramatically during pandemic quarantines. Why is this important? As Aronson and Jaffal (2021) stated, "social media has important implications for emerging adulthood," because "the ordinary and everyday aspects of social media represent broader social values."

In a content analysis of social media posts in a Facebook group called, "Zoom Memes for Self-Quaran-teens," researchers looked at the proportion of memes about specific topics as well as their social meaning through content analysis. Specifically related to economic inequality, Aronson found that the most common theme in shared humor about generational conflict found that young adults view older generations as responsible for the severity of the outbreak during the pandemic. The most common theme in this Facebook group was generational identity humor, making up 48.3% of all memes shared in the group. Other themes center on the developmental experiences of young adults during the pandemic and their social isolation. (Aronson 2021)

The first sub-theme and most frequent theme within generational conflict was mistrust of the government and political leaders. Using sarcasm, posts on this particular Facebook group suggests that the government has failed to prevent the spread of COVID-19 through ineffective

policies and a disregard for regulations. The memes mock the older generation that makes up the government leadership for failing to understand how to respond to the pandemic. As a result, young people have suffered economically. Over the last several decades, a clear generational divide has been evident in views of government, with those in younger generations more likely than those in older generations to express a preference for a bigger government with more services and social safety nets. (Doherty 2018) OK, Boomer can be interpreted as pushback against the "pull yourselves up by your bootstraps," mentality of the perceived workaholic Boomer generation.

OK, Boomer Theme: Climate change crisis

A second common theme in Ok, Boomer memes and topics that spark inter-generational conflict are climate change policies and environmentalism. In his research of Tik Tok videos, Zeng found that most of the Ok, Boomer memes addressing environmental issues called out the older generations' failures to respond to the climate crisis. Gen Z's climate activism goes beyond a "green" message and is a "fight against intergenerational injustice" that 'catalyzed public debate on what society owes to the young.' (Zeng 2021)

Again, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the virus became another meme element in Gen Z's climate change jokes. (Zeng) The dialog goes beyond criticism of Boomer climate policies and slides downward into COVID-19 as the "Boomer remover". This harsh stance is likely a result of the heightened anxiety in the zeitgeist due to the pandemic. Zeng notes that on Tik Tok, the pandemic was framed either as Earth's 'revenge' for the environmental damage caused by the Boomer generation or as a weapon for teenagers to 'punish' Boomers for ignoring their requests for environmental protection. (Zeng 2021)

Swim, et al (2021) reviewed ten years of survey data gathered from a representative sample of United States residents and documented greater increases in worry about climate change and, to a lesser degree, anger and guilt about climate change, within the two youngest generations relative to changes among older generations. (Swim 2021) The degree of "worry" in younger generations peaked in 2019, when the OK, Boomer trend took off. Having witnessed wildfires, Hurricane Katrina, floods, and other natural disasters in their growing up years, younger people understandably have an emotional reaction to the perceived increase in natural disasters and fear that not enough is being done to help remedy the situation. As Swim describes, a topic of concern for youthful generations is climate change, with younger generations being frustrated about older generations' failure to acknowledge and address threats from climate change (Mezzofiore, 2019; Romano, 2019).

At the core of the current intergenerational frustration is fear and worry: younger people don't feel their concerns are heard by older generations, who have a different view of the climate crisis because of their age and experience. However, it might not be the case that they don't care. Boomers have been speaking out about environmental issues since the 1960's and when *Silent Spring* was published in 1962. Many measures have been taken to improve the quality of our air and water since the 1960's, but those issues don't get discussed as often on social media as compared to global warming and the polar ice caps melting.

What's behind this anger expressed in OK, Boomer? Millennials are tired of being called out in the media, which they presume is run by a cadre of Boomers, for the inevitable changes that take place with the passage of time, trends, and circumstances. McGinn offers the perspective of a younger person who celebrates the meme after years of hearing how Millennials have "killed" a variety of economic traditions, from restaurant chains to department stores to

breakfast cereal, even though in her opinion, many of today's climate and economic crises have been perpetrated by the actions of earlier generations. (McGinn 2019). Millennial and GenZ are fearful of the many challenges their generation faces - student loan debt, economic instability made worse by the pandemic, and a looming climate crisis - which they feel are the results of short-sighted decisions made by previous generations. (McGinn 2019).

On the flip side, Boomers are tired of what they perceive as Millennial entitlement and whining when faced with the social and economic challenges. Boomers strike back with the insult "snowflakes," aimed at younger people who are overly emotional, unable to deal with opposing opinions, and want a participation trophy for everything.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Objectives

OK, Boomer highlights the current ideological and political conflict between younger and older generations expressed through the contemporary communication tactics of social media posts and ironic memes. The purpose of the research is to explore the dialog around OK, Boomer as a social media communication method and to test the hypothesis that economic inequality and the climate change crisis are the most common themes in this intergenerational conversation.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Q1: How are intergenerational political ideas or themes expressed in OK, Boomer memes as observed on social media sites?

Hypothesis: Members of Gen Z / Millennial generations express their criticism of older generations using OK, Boomer social media posts and memes because they feel misunderstood and unheard on important political topics.

Q2: What are the two most common intergenerational political issues expressed in OK,Boomer memes on social media?

Hypothesis: Older generations are to blame for both the escalating climate crisis and economic inequities between younger and older generations.

Methods of Data Collection

The research method describes how the data was collected and generated and how it was analyzed. In order to address Question 1, *How are intergenerational political ideas or themes expressed in OKBoomer memes as observed on social media sites?*, data was collected using the following content analysis methods:

1. Web search content analysis: web and social searches to collect past trends and current interest in OK, Boomer

2. Social media content analysis: social search conducted to find relevant examples of OK, Boomer memes with the themes of economic inequality and climate change

In order to address Question 2, *What are the two most common intergenerational political issues expressed in OKBoomer memes on social media?*, data was collected using the following method:

3. Online survey questionnaire to collect opinions and attitudes about socio-political topics from members of different generational groups

Internet Search: OK, Boomer

The purpose of conducting a web search was to gain an historical understanding of the OK, Boomer trend. Starting from this broad viewpoint allowed the researcher to identify the origin, frequency, and longevity of the trend on the internet at large. A subset of the web search was conducted via Google Social Search to observe the term on social media sites.

Social Search: OK, Boomer

The next data collection method was real-time social search to identify frequency, content themes, sentiment, and meme examples that supported the hypothesis about climate change and economic inequality as the two main themes of OK Boomer memes. The search was

conducted through www.social-searcher.com, a social media search engine which searches across social networks such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Tumblr, Reddit, Flickr, Dailymotion and Vimeo. According to Social Searcher.com, the real-time searches look back over a two-week time period. Social-Searcher.com queries user-generated content in posts, videos and images related search queries.

Social search was a selected methodology because it was a variation on traditional web search which used algorithms like traditional internet search but also provided insight on topic sentiment. Social-Searcher.com queries user-generated content in posts, videos and images related to the search parameters. The social search method was also intended to identify content themes and user sentiment associated with OK, Boomer as it related to climate crisis and economic inequity by finding examples of actual posts from users. Sentiment ratio is defined as the ratio of mentions of a brand or keyword that are generally positive to those that are generally negative. In terms of methodology, memes were observed only as published on public sites to avoid conflicts of interest or invasion of privacy.

Online Survey Questionnaire about OK, Boomer Themes

To explore the second research question, a short online survey was conducted with multiple choice questions using several established scales. The goal of this research was to explore the variables of generational group identity and the level of concern about key social issues among individuals of different generational groups. The methodology was intended to compare what was identified in the scholarly literature and in meme themes from web and social searches with what real people presently think about what OK, Boomer. The intention was to discover if there was a relationship between an individual's generational identity and how

important they felt certain social issues were, specifically economic inequality and the climate crisis.

The survey was designed with the free version of Qualtrics and consisted of nine multiple choice questions. The first and last questions were designed to ensure individuals taking the survey were over age 18 and would complete the age question accurately. Respondents chose one of six commonly recognized generational groups they identified with, such as Baby Boomer, Gen X, or Gen Z. Question 3 asked respondents to rank the importance of ten social issues, including climate change and economic insecurity, on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Very Important to Not at all Important.

Other questions asked about the respondents' participation in media accounts, frequency of posting to social media, awareness of OK, Boomer as a meme, and an open-ended qualitative question to identify one thing that would help generations better understand each other. (The survey questions are in the Appendix.)

Survey Instrument

The Qualtrics live survey link was deployed by the researcher on Amazon MTurk and requested 150 survey responses. Users were required to self-identify their age by both number and by year of birth. Users were also required to enter a unique randomized code number to take the survey and in turn received an Amazon MTurk identification code to submit.

Survey Procedure and Recruitment

Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) was utilized for recruiting adult participants (over age 18) with the qualifications of a U.S. high school diploma and living in the United States. MTurk is an online marketplace that allows workers to complete requested tasks. The researcher created a human intelligence task (HIT) by creating a new Project in MTurk that linked to the

live survey created in Qualtrics. Workers completed the Qualtrics survey and finalized the

process by receiving a unique MTurk code at the end of the survey, in an attempt to prevent

robots instead of humans from taking the survey.

The survey was pre-tested prior to launching on MTurk. A group of four individuals from

different age groups were recruited to take the survey on their mobile device or computer. The

researcher received feedback on how long it took to complete the survey and one error message

was reported. The flow error was corrected by changing a setting in Qualtrics. The pre-testing

proved helpful and did not result in significant changes to the survey design.

The survey introduction indicated to MTurk workers that the research was for a graduate

student project about social media and the topic of OK, Boomer. The description stated that a

unique code would be provided, that the researcher could not see participant identities, and that

all respondent information was kept confidential. The task was programmed to pay each worker

$0.35 per submitted survey and was set to a limit of 150 responses with a 24-hour time limit for

completion once the survey was started. The survey was available on MTurk for approximately

four days.

Survey Information Gathering and Questions

The survey first asked the respondents' current age. The next multiple-choice question

asked respondents to self-identify the generational group they belonged to: the Greatest

Generation, Silent Generation, Baby Boomer, Gen X, Millennial, Gen Z, or, I don't identify with

any of these groups.

A subsequent question inquired about two key themes found in OK Boomer social media

memes: economic inequality between generations; and which generation is to blame for the

current climate crisis. This questions was a rank order, 5-point Likert scale asking respondents to

rate the importance to them of both of these key topics, as well as eight other additional social and political issues, in order of importance: Economic inequality, Climate change, COVID-19 pandemic, Inflation, Unemployment and jobs, Student loan debt, Cost of housing, Food insecurity, Gun violence and crime, and the Mental health crisis. The intention of this question was to find out, what do members of different generational groups consider the most important social issues, and how does that importance vary between age / generational groups? Is there a relationship between generational groups and their opinions of these issues that correlates with the memes evidence gathered in web and social search?

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

OK, Boomer on the World Wide Web

The purpose of conducting a web search was to gain an historical understanding of the OK, Boomer trend. Starting from this broad viewpoint allowed the researcher to identify the origin, frequency, and longevity of the trend on the internet at large.

A standard Google Search from the emergence of the trend starting around December 1, 2019 to April 10, 2022 yielded about 7,810,000 results for the term OK, Boomer on the wide Internet. A Google Trends Search, as shown in the figure below, revealed the peak and then dropoff of this internet slang term over time, beginning around the end of 2019 and peaking from a search standpoint in the first part of 2020, before the pandemic took center stage in trend searches.

Figure 1: OK, Boomer on Google Trends 06/01/2019 to present:
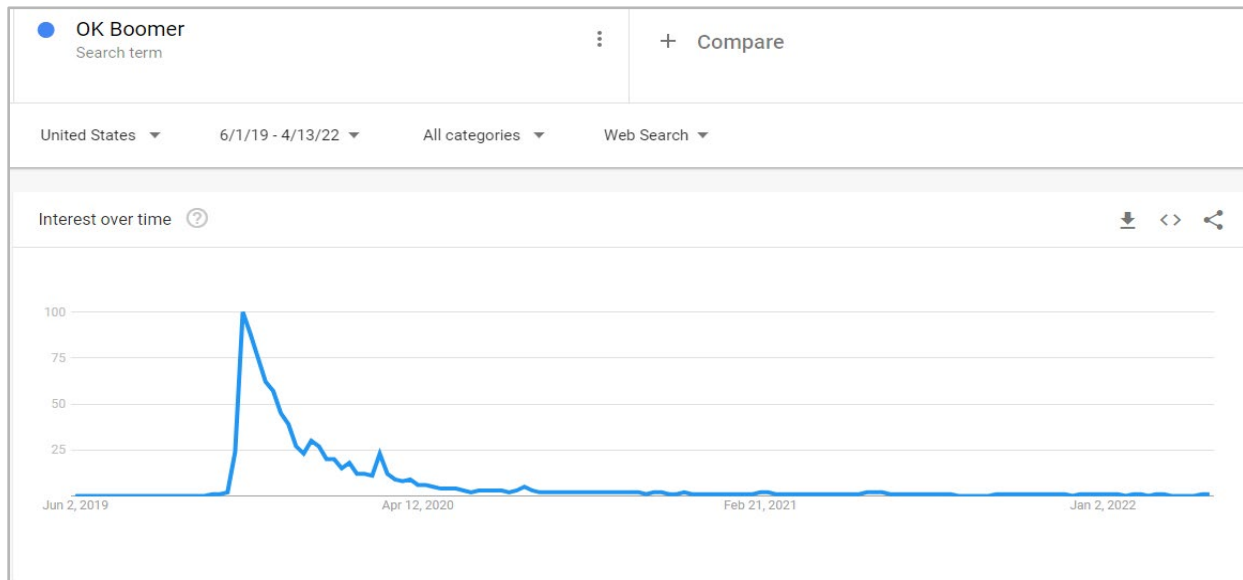
A subset of the web search was conducted via Google Social Search to observe the frequency of the term on social media sites. A Google Social Search for OK, Boomer retrieved about 102,000 results from the most common social media sites, including Facebook, Twitter,

TikTok, Instagram, Linkedin and Pinterest, confirming that this internet term is widespread online.

OK, Boomer Social Media Presence

The next data collection method was real-time social search to identify frequency, content themes, sentiment, and meme examples that supported the hypothesis about climate change and economic inequality as the two main themes of OK Boomer memes. The search was conducted through www.social-searcher.com, a social media search engine which searches across social networks such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Tumblr, Reddit, Flickr, Dailymotion and Vimeo. According to Social Searcher, the real-time searches look back over a two-week time period.

Sentiment ratio is defined as the ratio of mentions of a brand or keyword that are generally positive to those that are generally negative. The OK Boomer ratio of 3:2 in the chart below indicated that there were generally more positive posts when compared to negative sentiment posts. However, more than 76% of posts were categorized as neutral,which may indicate how the popularity of the meme is waning.

Table 1: Social searches for "OK Boomer" for the two-week period ending April 12, 2022:

OK, Boomer Social Search Results	
Total Mentions	649
Users	331
Sentiment Ratio	3:2
- *Positive*	15%
- *Negative*	9%
- *Neutral*	76%

Figure 2: Social-Searcher.com sites where OK

Boomer content was generated

For the two-week period ending April 12,

2022, the top three social sites that generated the most

OK, Boomer content were flickr.com, a photo-sharing

site; dailymotion.com, a French video-sharing

platform with global reach; and Reddit.com.
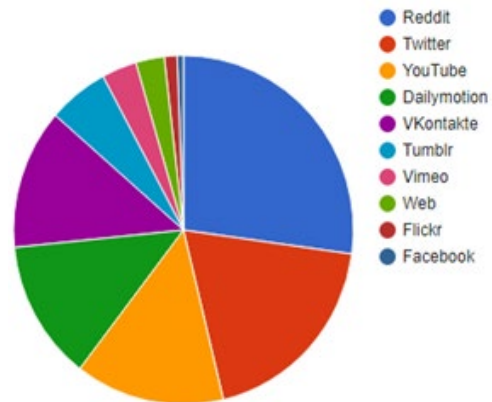
Table 2: Media types of OK, Boomer content on Social-Searcher.com

OK, Boomer as a topic was expressed most often in video, photo, or link-sharing, or

status posts. For the two-week period ending April 12, 2022, the most common media types

were:

Media Types – OK, Boomer	Mentions/Count
Video	85
Photo	116
Link	102
Status / Post	104

Research Results - Meme Content

As explained in the introduction and literature review for this project, a meme is an idea,

behavior, or style that spreads by means of imitation from person to person within a culture and

often carries symbolic meaning representing a particular phenomenon or theme. (Wikipedia,

2022) Reddit.com stood out as a social media site with an abundance of OK, Boomer meme

content, particularly in a Reddit subthread titled, "reddit/OKBoomer. It can be assumed that a

small number of users on Reddit.com generate OK, Boomer content that is shared with larger

audiences on many other social media sites and widely on the internet.

In terms of methodology, memes were observed only as published on public sites to

avoid conflicts of interest or invasion of privacy. The meme examples below were found on both

the Reddit subthread "reddit/OKBoomer," and on Instagram and Twitter. Example memes

support the researcher's hypothesis that in addition to general tension between generations,

economic inequality and climate change were two popular meme topics.

Figure 3: Current OK, Boomer Meme Examples

MEME THEME	SOCIAL MEDIA SITE
Reddit - Economic Inequality	

Reddit - Climate Change	
Instagram - Economic Inequality	

Twitter - Economic Inequality	
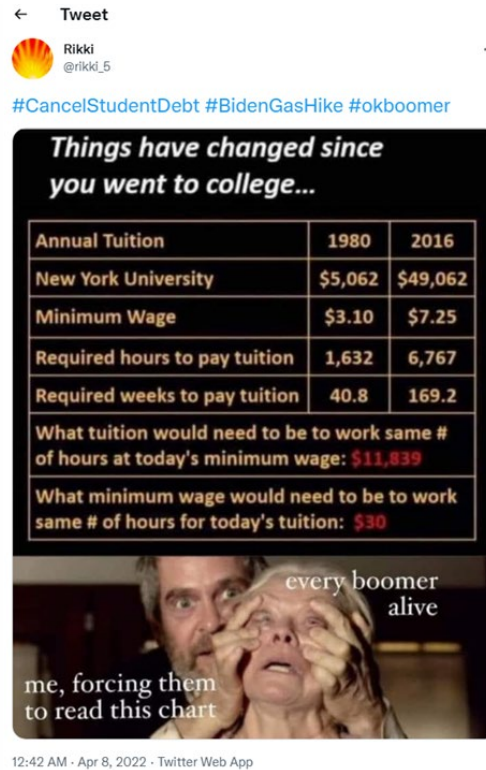
Lastly, "OK Boomer" went viral as a video meme on the popular social media site TikTok in October 2019. Zeng and Abidin (2021) studied the memefication of intergenerational politics on TikTok through user-generated videos. A Tik Tok search revealed more than 3.9 billion views of videos with the #OK Boomer hashtag, many with the two common themes of the economy and climate change. As shown in Figure 4, OK, Boomer Tik Tok themes hit on the tensions between older and younger people, how older people treat younger people in the workplace, and economic and climate concerns.

Figure 4: OK, Boomer on TikTok
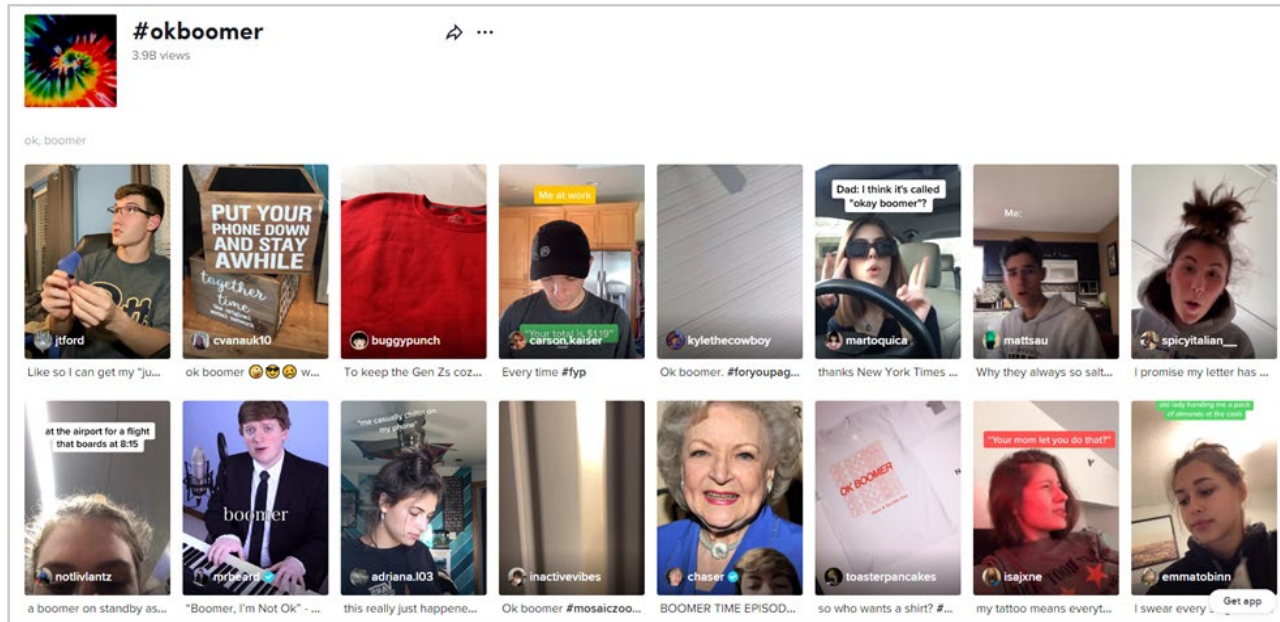
Research Questionnaire Results Overview

The survey was designed in the free version of Qualtrics and consisted of nine multiple choice questions. The first and last questions were designed to ensure individuals taking the survey were over age 18 and would complete the age question accurately. In Question2, respondents chose one of six commonly recognized generational groups they identified with such as Baby Boomer, Gen X, or Gen Z. Question 3 asked respondents to rank the importance of ten social issues, including climate change and economic insecurity, on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Very Important to Not at all Important.

Other questions asked about the respondents' participation in media accounts, frequency of posting to social media, awareness of OK, Boomer as a meme, and an open-ended qualitative question to identify one thing that would help generations better understand each other.

Figure 5: Q1. Age Distribution of Respondents

A total of 153 respondents fell between the ages of 18 and 66 with a mean age of 36 years old (three extra responses were counted over the limit of 150).

#		Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Count
1	What is your current age?	18	66	36	153

The next multiple-choice question asked respondents to self-identify the generational group they belonged to: the Greatest Generation, Silent Generation, Baby Boomer, Gen X, Millennial, Gen Z, or, I don't identify with any of these groups. 86% of respondents were concentrated in three main groups: Millennial, Gen X, and Gen Z.

Figure 6: Q2. Generational Identity

What generational group do you most closely identify with?

Choice #	Answer	%
5	Millennial (born 1981 to 1996)	40%
4	Generation X (born 1965 to 1980)	28%
6	Generation Z (born 1997 to 2012)	18%
3	Baby Boomer (born 1946 to 1964)	8%
7	I don't identify with any of these groups	4%
1	Greatest Generation (born 1901 to 1927)	1%
2	Silent Generation (born 1928 to 1945)	1%
	Total	100%

Respondents were next asked to think about themselves and their generational identity, then rank what they thought were the most important to least important current societal issues in the U.S. The question was intended to ask what do members of different generational groups consider the most important social issues, how does that importance vary between age / generational groups, and does it match the hypothesis of climate change and economic inequality as primary themes?

When breaking out the data of "All Respondents" on the specific topics of Economic Inequality and Climate Change, 72% of all respondents ranked the economic issue as Important or Very Important. 64% of all respondents ranked the climate crisis as important or very important.

**Figure 7: Q3. Importance of two key social issues - <u>All Respondents</u>**
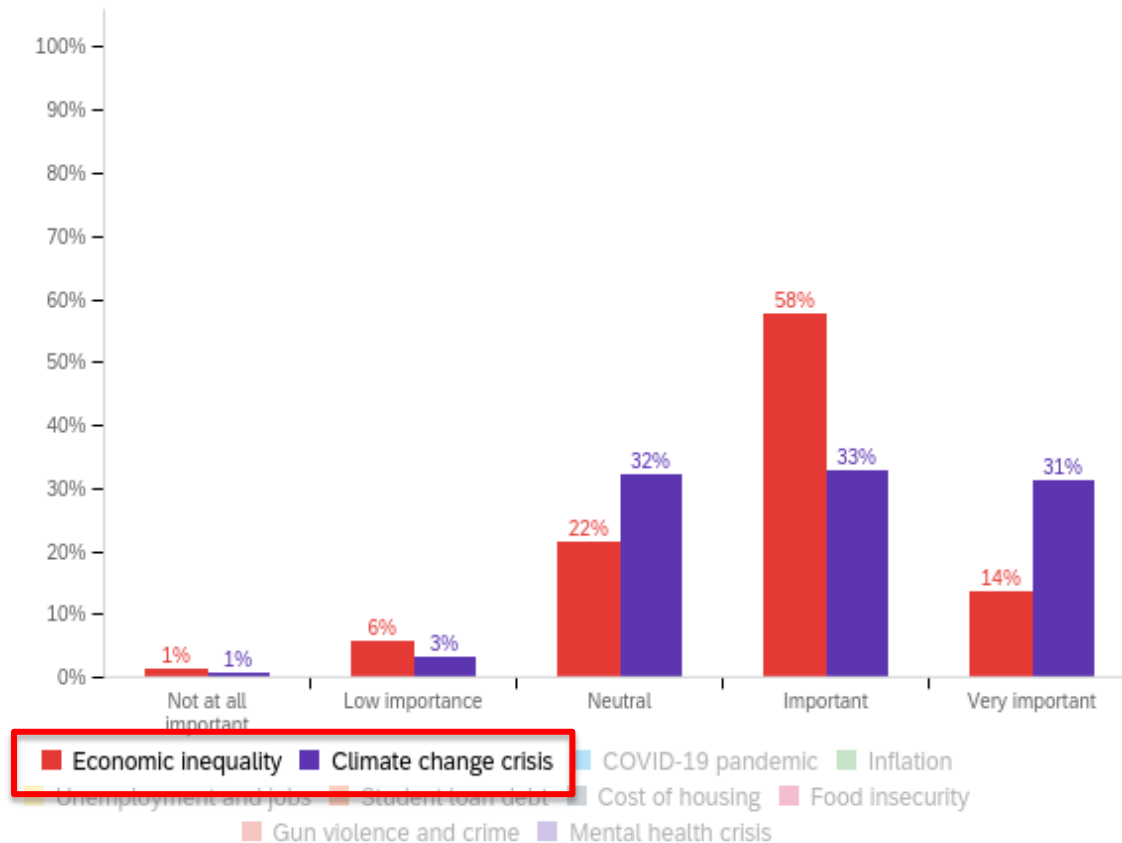
On the topic of Economic Inequality, among the four largest generation groups of Boomer, Gen X, Millennial, and Gen Z, the results indicated that overall, more than half of each group ranked the issue as "Important." Interestingly, 83% of Boomers rated Economic Inequality as Important or Very Important. Millennials were close behind with 80% of

respondents indicating it was an Important / Very Important issue. Gen Z combined totals were

71%, and 58% of Gen X ranked economic issues as Important/Very Important.

Figure 8: Q3. Importance of Economic Inequality - *Breakout by Generational Group*
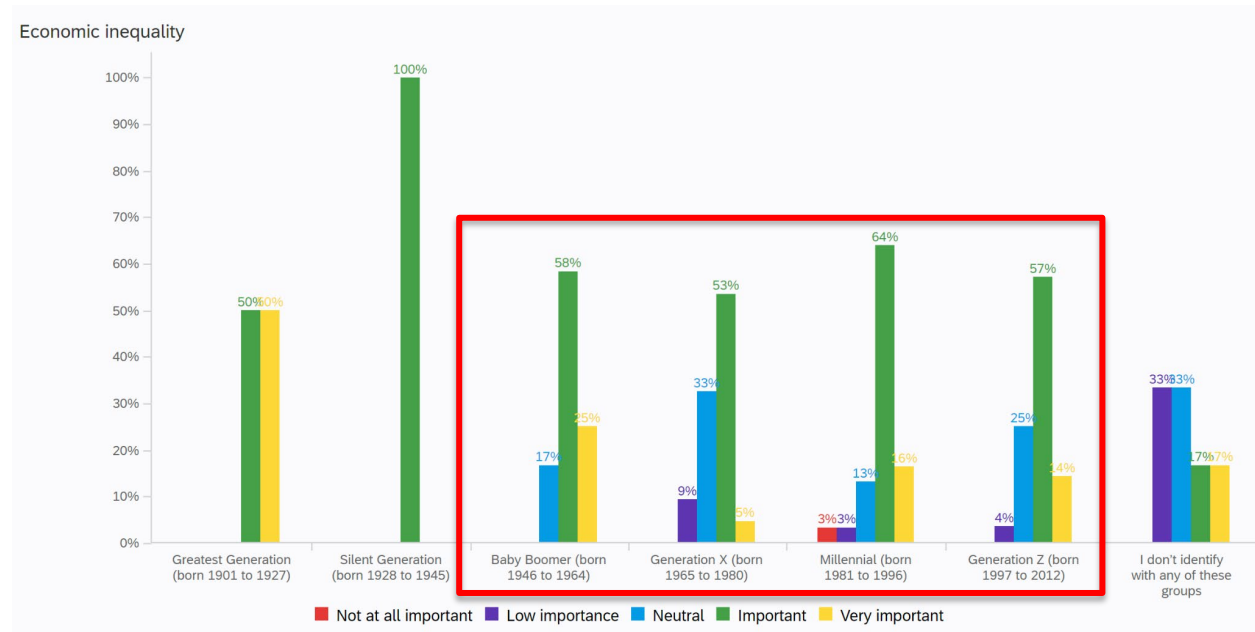
On the topic of the climate change crisis, again concentrating on the four primary

generation groups of Boomer, Gen X, Millennial, and Gen Z, the results indicated that overall,

this issue was not considered quite as important as Economic Inequality. Surprisingly, Boomers

rated the Climate Crisis as Important or Very Important at 75%, then Millennials next at 66%

with an Important or Very Important rating on this issue. Gen X came in third at 63% with Gen Z

close behind at 61% at ranking climate change Important/Very Important.

Figure 9: Q3. Importance of Climate Change Crisis - *Breakout by Generational Group*
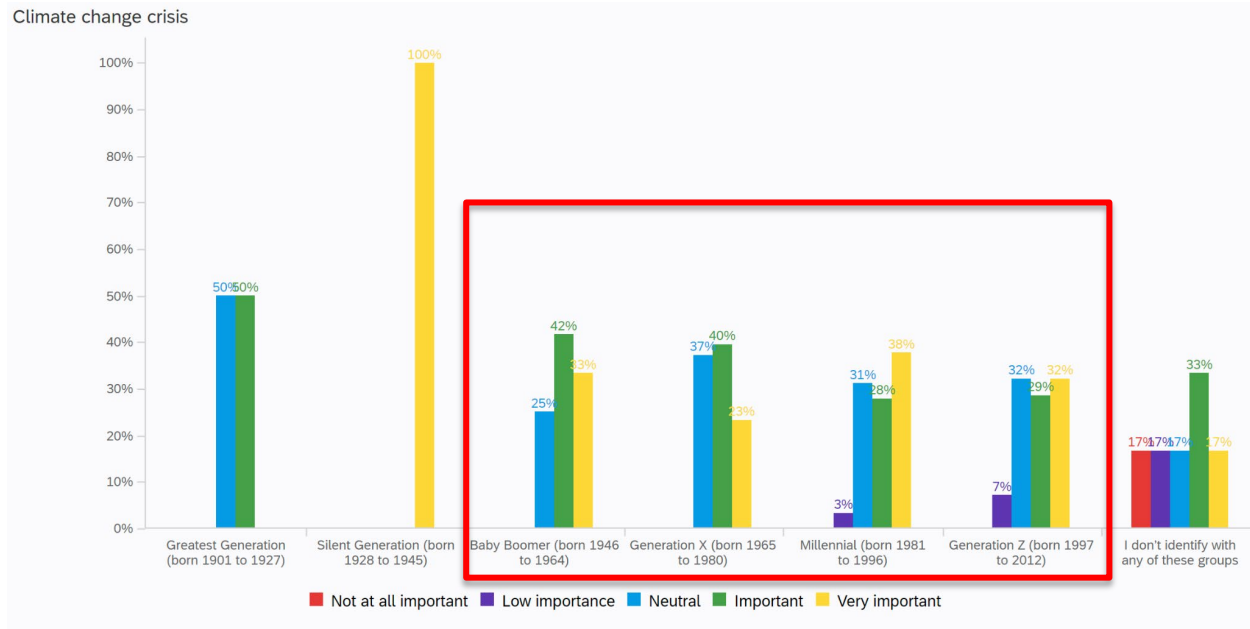
Additional Research Results

The remaining survey questions attempted to gauge respondents' general familiarity with the OK, Boomer meme, their engagement with social media and on what sites, and asked a qualitative question about improving intergenerational relationships.

When asked if they were familiar with OK, Boomer as a social media meme before taking the survey, 76% of respondents replied yes, 16% replied maybe, and 7% were not familiar with the term. 85% of respondents strongly or somewhat agreed that the memes are funny.

In general, all respondents had some type of social media account, with the most popular accounts on Instagram (22%), Facebook (22%), YouTube (16%) and Twitter (13%). Most people engaged on social media frequently, with 36% posting 2-3 times per week, 29% posting daily, and 13% of people posting 4-6 times per week.

Qualitative Responses

The researcher asked respondents an open-ended question: "If you could identify one thing that would help members of younger and older generations better understand each other, what would it be?" Approximately 140 responses were collected. A word cloud with the top 25 words best illustrated the combined responses, with generally positive themes of connection, understanding, together, play, love, and games. This qualitative evidence of a yearning for connection and cooperation between the generations is very different from the critical, ageist posts and memes that were found in the online content analysis of popular memes. Based on this anecdotal evidence, the case could be made that better relations through positive dialog between older and younger generations is a hopeful and reasonable goal to strive for.

Figure 10: Q8. Improving Intergenerational Relationships

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

As Zeng stated, the coverage of social and political issues reflects the social sharing of everyday life, where individual experiences and thoughts are documented and shared online. (Zeng, 2021). From selfies and memes to hashtags and parodies, social media is used for entertainment as well as personal expressions of political commentary, engagement, and participation. In the contemporary format of meme, OK, Boomer represents an enduring theme - that of the present generation blaming previous generations for their problems.

The research supported the hypothesis that climate change and lack of economic opportunities for younger generations are two common themes in the meme content. The feedback from the online survey provided a window into each generation's perspective on these two key themes. Surprisingly, Boomers *do* care about the environment and economics, despite Millennial and younger generation complaints to the contrary in their Tik Tok and memes.

Boomers have been the subject of anger from younger generations who blame them for a variety of issues, from Brexit to electing Trump, to generational economic inequality (Meisner, 2020; White, 2013) and climate change (Lim, 2020). (Zeng, 2021) There may be some truth to these claims, but it is also possible that Boomers and older generations have been unfairly blamed and that OK, Boomer goes beyond social criticism into the realm of ageism. To affect real change with some of these difficult challenges in our society, I believe those who criticize, on either side, could transform complaining into activism through organization, collaboration, and championing the causes they believe in.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this research project have to be seen in the context of some limitations. Two categories of limitations are those of the methodologies (content analysis and online survey) and those of the researcher.

Limitations of the Content Analysis Methodology

The research method describes how the data was collected and generated and how it was analyzed. To address Question 1, *How are intergenerational political ideas or themes expressed in #OkBoomer memes as observed on social media sites?,* data was collected using a content analysis methodology, including:

- web and social searches to collect past trends and current interest in OK, Boomer

- social media content review to find examples of memes with the themes of economic inequality and climate change

There are two major limitations of the content analysis methodology. One is that the universe of potential search results on the topic of OK, Boomer is vast. The sheer amount of data that resulted from searches could mean that the researcher may be seeing the tip of the content iceberg on the topic. This required the researcher to exercise judgment (and potential bias) when analyzing search results.

The second limitation was that the research was conducted using free search tools. As a student-led project, the researcher used free tools available to conduct searches and content analysis. Better results and analysis could have been gathered using more sophisticated and professional social search and analysis tools. In addition, OK, Boomer is a recent trend, and therefore few scholarly data reports exist on the topic; although a sufficient amount of journal articles and papers were discovered during the literature review to inform the project.

Limitations of the Online Survey Methodology

Because of the contemporary nature of this topic, the researcher wanted to extend inquiry beyond content analysis of social media and gather data with a survey. To address Question 2, *What are the two most common intergenerational political issues expressed in #OKBoomer memes on social media?* data was gathered with an online survey questionnaire to collect opinions and attitudes about socio-political topics from members of different generational groups

The instrument survey and data collection using Qualtrics and MTurk had limitations. First, the researcher used both of these tools for the first time. This resulted in some trial and error, which took up extra time to correct the error, but ultimately resulted in better survey questions. For example, the first time Question 3 was presented in the live survey, the settings allowed for multiple selections in the rank order, which resulted in invalid results and the survey had to be re-distributed.

A second limitation of online survey methodology is the random nature of MTurk workers. The researcher used random ID codes to limit "robot" answers and force a human response, but some bot answers may have come through. The research set two main qualifications for respondents - U.S. high school graduate and over age 18. This allowed a broad audience to take the survey. An inherent bias of an online, anonymous survey is that participants are comfortable using digital tools, which means we don't hear from those who are not, such as older individuals who aren't comfortable using computers or social media. It can be assumed the survey-takers are tech-savvy and educated. Another limitation is anonymity; because MTurk workers are paid per response, they may go through the survey quickly without fully comprehending the questions.

The third imitation was the small sample size of 150 responses. Because the researcher paid $0.35 for each response, there was a cap on the total collected. The researcher did not conduct a pre-survey analysis to determine the exact number of responses needed for statistical validity and instead relied on the example report from class as a guideline for the number of responses (which was approximately 175) and chose an affordable option.

Through this project experience, the researcher found both Qualtrics and MTurk to be useful and effective tools for survey and data collection and would definitely use them again for future study project. Qualtrics's built-in checks provided guidance on question and survey design to help build a quality and valid survey.

Limitations of the Researcher

Limitations of the researcher were time constraints, budget limitations, lack of knowledge, and personal bias. Given the breadth of the topic and as a full-time worker, the researcher found it challenging to budget time effectively and narrow the study scope. The decision was made to choose interesting and useful content analysis nuggets to educate and enlighten the reader about OK, Boomer memes.

Free and commonly available search tools were used to conduct the content analysis, as well as the researcher's previous experience. This was effective, but there is the potential for the researcher's bias to creep in. As a member of Generation X, the researcher has a personal world view that may be quite different from either a younger or older individual. An example was limiting the example of OK, Boomer memes to Reddit, Instagram, and Twitter. The researcher did not expand the exploration of memes on Snapchat, What's App or other less mainstream social media apps because of lack of familiarity with them. In terms of budget limitations, using

professional or paid research tools, in addition to the MTurk workers, may have yielded more insightful results.

A final limitation is the researcher's lack of knowledge and research skill, as this was a first foray into this type of research project. For example, the question of how to determine statistical validity for the online Qualtrics survey was beyond the scope of the researcher's existing knowledge. Another example was how the questions were written. The Qualtrics check graded the questions as "Fair" on their internal rating scale of a quality survey, so perhaps the questions themselves could have been stated differently to get a better Qualtrics grade.

Conclusions and the Potential for Future Study

With regard to future study topics, there is the potential of deeper inquiry into the opinions of the younger generations such as Millennial and Gen Z. I believe OK, Boomer memes also reflect the polarization present in modern discourse on many topics, with the COVID-19 masker/anti-masker debate being a timely example. In my opinion, OK, Boomer memes are entertaining, but they also contain a lot of overblown rhetoric, ageism, and blame or even victimhood. Intention and action move the needle on social causes, not complaining.

There are other important social issues in addition to economic inequality and climate change that need our attention and ongoing dialog. For example, when I disaggregated the survey data by Millennial-only response to the other social issues ranked by Very Important or Important, I found the following quite interesting:

Table 3: Most Important Social Issues - Millennial Generation

Generational Group	Social Issue	Ranked as Very Important + Important
Millennial	Economic inequality	81%
Millennial	Gun violence	75%
Millennial	Unemployment & jobs	74%
Millennial	Cost of housing	71%
Millennial	Mental health crisis	67%
Millennial	Climate change	66%
Millennial	Inflation	61%
Millennial	Student loan debt	59%
Millennial	Food insecurity	30%

What this data suggests is young people care about many issues beyond economic insecurity and climate change, but so do older generations. What is "trending" on social media doesn't tell the whole story of generational opinions. I am hopeful that dialog will open up between the generations, based on the positive themes of connection, games, and togetherness in the word cloud responses. Keeping an open mind and appreciating OK, Boomer for its entertainment purposes as well as its value for social commentary is where this discussion concludes.

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APPENDIX

Qualtrics Survey Questions

Online Survey Link:

https://qfreeaccountssjc1.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_0MShgryLHVIRpDo

Survey Introduction on MTurk:

#OK Boomer memes have become a shorthand way of signaling one's dissatisfaction with the difference in beliefs, values and opinions between younger and older generations. OK, Boomer is a term from social media used by members of younger generations to express frustration with the viewpoints and opinions of members of older generations. Please complete the following short survey to share your opinions.

Questions:

1. What is your current age? (numeric entry only)

2. What generational group do you most closely identify with?

    1. Greatest Generation (born 1901-1927)
    2. Silent Generation (born 1928 - 1945)
    3. Baby Boomer Generation (born 1946-1964)
    4. Generation X (born 1965 -1980)
    5. Millennial Generation (born 1981-1996)
    6. Generation Z (born 1997-2012)
    7. I don't identify with any of these groups

3. Thinking about yourself and your generational identity, rank what you think are the most critical political issues we currently face in the U.S.: (Rank order, 5-pt Likert Scale: Not at all important, Low importance, Neutral, Important, Very important)

    1. Economic inequality
    2. Climate change crisis
    3. COVID-19 pandemic
    4. Inflation
    5. Unemployment and jobs
    6. Student loan debt
    7. Cost of housing
    8. Food insecurity
    9. Gun violence and crime
    10. Mental health crisis

4. OK, Boomer is an expression on social media typically from members of younger generations to members of older generations. Prior to taking this survey, were you familiar with the term or hashtag #OKBoomer on social media?
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. Not sure

5. If yes, in your opinion, do you think social media memes like OK, Boomer are funny?

    1. Strongly agree
    2. Somewhat agree
    3. Neither agree nor disagree
    4. Somewhat disagree
    5. Strongly disagree

6. Which of the following social networking sites do you currently have an account with? (Can select more than one)
    1. Twitter
    2. Facebook
    3. Instagram
    4. YouTube
    5. TikTok
    6. SnapChat
    7. WhatsApp
    8. LinkedIn
    9. Reddit
    10. None
    11. Other

7. How often do you typically post to social media sites?
    1. 2-3 times a week
    2. Daily
    3. 4-6 times a week
    4. Once a week
    5. Multiple times a day
    6. Never

8. If you could identify one thing that would help generations better understand each other, what would it be? (open-ended comment box)

9. What year were you born? (4-digit entry)